DECODINGS

[door opens]

If the brain becomes disorganized, a person may forget how to eat. He may walk in circles, or become rooted to a single spot. Some, for convenience sake, choose to live inside boxes. Others receive messages from tiny molecules of air. Living in the world is not so very difficult. There are patterns to follow. Numbers, and words of advice. Making contact with others, when approached with determination and vigor, is as straightforward as eating a bowl of mush. [pause]

The mystery of life is being here with you. The mystery is being with your absence. This is a story. There is isolation and brotherhood. Desperation and hope. A heart is laid bare. There is blood. A man leaps from an airplane. Danger. It is not a story for the timid.

[end at fade, before escalator]

[begin as camera zooms into painting]

There's a desert near Palm Springs called the Mojave, where the Joshua Tree grows. A cactus that looks like a palm tree with human arms grafted on, the plant was named for Joshua. After forty years of wandering in the desert, he led his tribes to the

promised land. Years of war followed, by the end of which many of the tribes could no longer be accounted for. Some had been decimated; others had simply wandered off.

One of these, by means of an ancient land bridge constructed in those days of miracles, found its way to the Mojave. The bridge is gone, but glimpses of the tribe have been caught at dusk, in the shadows of rocks, on canyon walls, in the dust of dry washes. Unaccountably, the tribe is now all men, and each century they have grown younger, so that the men now are no older than boys. They have been blinded by the desert sun, deafened by the wind, but they have wandered together for so long that they know each other by touch. Most now have lost the capacity to speak, or perhaps they have simply lost the will. It doesn't really matter. Long ago they said what needed to be said. What will persist as they grow younger, as they turn to seed, and then to thought, is their love for each other. They have always loved, even as they have always wandered, bringing hope to the land.

[end right before dive from rock]

[begin at second fiery crash]

The guy who told me this was a Marine who was stationed out there, a place called the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center. He couldn't have been more than twenty, hair cut too short to really tell what color it was, pretty eyes, soft features. We met out on one of the desert trails and got to talking. He didn't

care much for the Marines. So I asked why he didn't just get out. "There's no escape," he said. "What do you mean, there's no escape?" "Look. You sleep when they say sleep. Dump when they say dump. You don't and they set the other guys against you. And that's all you got, the other guys. "He gave me a sly sort of smile. "The only way out is in. All the way." There was something in his tone. I don't know. It seemed like he was mocking me, and while fair play suggested that I mock him in return, I decided instead to show the good manners I'd learned as a child. Keeping in mind how proud my parents would be, I knelt on the ground and told him to drop his pants. Not surprisingly, he obeyed. I held held him tenderly and placed my mouth over his already hard cock.

[end at "He Ain't Heavy..."]

[begin during buttoning up vest]

It's a question of intimacy. We make what bridges we can. There's a game that boys play called Young Bucks. They strip to the waist, puff out their chests and charge into one another. When they bounce back, they charge again. At a slightly older age, boys become fond of goosing one another. This involves grabbing the crotch of a friend and squeezing. The word derives from the shaft of the penis, which, if it happens to be hard, feels like the neck of a goose. Alternatively, the word describes the honking sound often emitted by the surprised recipient. In medical terms, goosing is felt to be a special form of pseudo-cutaneous linkage. [pause]

Pseudo-cutaneous linkage is believed to be involuntary, occurring when the strength of excitatory stimuli overcome neuronal inhibition. Internal control gives way to release, the arm snaps out and the fingers squeeze reflexively. Investigators feel that the linkage reflex represents a primitive attempt on the part of the male organism at attachment and bonding. Damage to the center can lead to varying levels of alienation and withdrawal, and voluntary thwarting of the reflex is associated with critical states of depression.

In contrast, those men capable of full expression of pseudo-cutaneous linkage seem to readily enter into intimate and rewarding relationships. They display high levels of self-confidence and esteem. Samples have been taken of their neural fluids to isolate the bioactive substances, and drugs are currently under development.

[end at man lighting pipe]

[begin at flower with hand]

There's this guy I know who, whenever the weather got bad, used to jump in his car and head toward it. It didn't matter what he was doing or who he was with, as soon as he saw the sky darken or heard on the radio that a storm was coming, he tanked up and headed into the thick of it. He liked snowstorms the best, and rainstorms with gail force winds. In the beginning he'd drive

just a little ways from the city until he found some open spot where he could stand out under the weather, but pretty soon he started driving farther. It was as though each new storm washed out a little more of whatever he was using to keep himself in check, to keep the lid on. Eventually, it got to the point where all his barriers were down. By then he was driving five, six hours from home into the eyes of the biggest storms of the winter. What he'd do when he got there was park his car and hike up to the highest land he could find. Sometimes he'd take his dog with him, a giant basset hound named Benway. And with the wind and rain pounding at him, lashing out, he'd scream, he'd dance and sing. The last time he did this, he was picked up driving in repeated figure-eights in the middle of a snowstorm near the Oregon border. Benway was sitting next to him in the front seat, and in the back was a cardboard box where the two of them slept. He told the cops that the dog knew as much as he did and without him he'd be lost.

[end at sky diving]

[begin as man goes through door before "The End"]

A couple of months later I visited him at home. He had been put in the hospital for observation, and was released when they realized he wasn't a danger to himself. They had, however, taken away his car, and Benway. He seemed pretty withdrawn. They had him on drugs and it was hard to get him to talk. Now, he told me, he was constantly racked by violent chills. Sweat would pour out

of him, freezing on his skin and icing his eyes shut. I left him struggling with the elements. [pause]

The world is full of miracles. We stand up; we lie down. Chew, and swallow. After we end something, we begin something else. It seems only natural. [pause]

A boy lies on the back seat of his parent's car, staring up at the trees rushing past. Illuminated by street lamps, they seem huge and powerful, yet comforting. The trees are always there, they can be counted on, and nothing whatever is expected of him. Nothing at all.